

SUKKOS: AN EXTRA-STRENGTH MEASURE OF FAITH

Category: Holidays, Sukkot

There is an interesting paradox about Sukkah. On one hand, the rain must be able to get it, but on the other, it must provide sufficient shade. But if we celebrate the clouds of glory, shouldn't we be fully protected? The answer lies in the deeper representation of rain vs. sun - trust vs. personal initiative.

Rain in the Sukkah

One year, as my family and I were sitting in our Sukkah with our guests, suddenly - surprise - it began raining. I told my guests that we were going to move into the house to finish the meal, because according to halachah, it was permissible to go back into the house to eat in such a situation. But the guests were too perceptive and were quick to realize that I didn't eat anything. I was forced to explain to them that even though one indeed is allowed to eat outside the sukkah in the rain, Chassidim still have the custom of not eating or drinking outside the sukkah, even when it's pouring rain.

Now, there is something interesting about this custom.

When we build a sukkah, it doesn't matter what material the walls are made of: cloth, wood or stone. As long as the sukkah is open to the sky, with schach replacing the standard roof and ceiling, it's kosher.

But how much schach (such as bamboo poles, cedar boughs or palm branches), must be placed on the sukkah? On the one hand, Halachah states that the definition of schach is "more shade than sun." If there is more sunlight than shade, the sukkah is invalid. This is the best way to determine if the sukkah is indeed kosher. On the other hand, however, you have to be careful not to put on too much schach, which is measured by not being able to see the major stars. These stars must be visible through the schach. However, if they are not visible from the inside, the sukkah is still kosher.

When it comes to rain, however, there are no leniencies or exemptions. Thus

writes the Alter Rebbe in his Shulchan Aruch, his Code of Jewish Law: “If the schach is so thick that the rain cannot fall into the sukkah, it’s invalid because it can only be classified as a sukkah if it merely serves to provide shade. But if it protects against rain, it can’t be called a sukkah but rather, a sort of house,” (Code of Jewish Law 631:5). This means: if rain can’t penetrate the sukkah through the schach, then the sukkah’s considered a regular house for all considerations.

So we now have the correct parameters of what defines a proper sukkah: a structure that shelters against the sun, but not against the rain.

Rain but not Sun?

Seemingly, however, this is not understood. The whole point of sitting in a sukkah is to remember that Hashem provided protection and shelter to the Jews for 40 years in the desert. Hashem protected us via the Clouds of Glory, through which no rain or any foreign entity penetrated. So if we do this mitzvah to commemorate the Clouds of Glory in the desert, shouldn’t we at least set up a tent? And if, on the other hand, the whole goal of Sukkos is to give us a feel for the great outdoors and living outside with no protection against the forces of nature, then we should go to a park and celebrate Sukkos there! There we would feel the full might and power of nature and really realize how much we need G-d’s protection.

So what is this combination of shelter from the sun on one hand, and prohibition for the shelter to fully protect from the elements and allow the rain to get inside the sukkah on the other hand?

Perhaps we can explain it like this: the schach symbolizes to us the true meaning of faith in G-d.

On the one hand, you have the sun, symbolizing the laws of nature. The sun rises every morning without cessation, a fact that has never changed in history. We never pray for G-d to send us the sun, because G-d Himself established the sun in the constant laws of nature and the permanent cycle of day and night. On the other hand, rain is something unpredictable, and even when we expect it, it doesn’t always come. That’s precisely why there is a special prayer in the Amidah in which we ask G-d to send us rain.

In other words, the sun symbolizes the laws of nature, the predictable, while conversely, rain symbolizes the unpredictable and the non-routine. It's impossible to know on any given day whether it's going to rain or not—it entirely depends on G-d and comes from Above, as do all the blessings from G-d's Holy and Open Hand.

Initiative vs. Trust

This is the bottom-line idea of the sukkah—the double idea of the sukkah.

On the one hand, the schach must provide shade from the sun. To succeed in life, a person must do everything that falls under his or her personal responsibility. Indeed, this is why G-d has given us the intelligence necessary to accomplish these things. On the other hand, the sukkah must be constructed in such a way that the rain can get in. Rain symbolizes those forces which are beyond nature, forces mightier than nature itself. People need to understand that they cannot rely on themselves and that their futures are not completely guaranteed—rather, we must depend upon G-d.

Within the framework of nature, one must do everything within his or her power, but when it comes to something impossible to control—then one must trust in G-d that everything will work out in the best possible way.

This is the meaning of “trust.” Not like people who think that you can sit in your house all day and wait for a miracle from G-d. Just the opposite—G-d's blessing comes in “all that you do.” One needs to do everything within his power.

Still, in the grand scheme of things, one must remember that everything is in the hands of Heaven, and after all the groundwork, we still depend on G-d's kindness—and it is this trust that rain symbolizes, being something unpredictable and something over which we have no power.

This is the message of the schach: there needs to be shelter from the sun, but on the other hand we must constantly remember that rain comes from G-d. That's why Chasidim, who understand that the entire idea of Sukkos is to practically learn and appreciate the nature of trust in G-d, have the custom of sitting and eating in the sukkah even when it's raining—because this is the ultimate purpose of building and sitting in the sukkah.

And so, my friends, I want to tell you from personal experience: nobody has ever gotten sick from eating in the sukkah in the cold and rain, but just the opposite—they have gotten an extra-strength measure of faith and trust in G-d.

Good Yom Tov!